

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

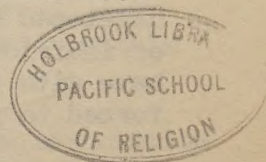
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 178

December 1952

## CHRISTIAN FAITH AND COMMUNITY

By Edwin L. Becker\*



Most of us serve out our Christian vocation within fairly modest geographical limits. Our chief assignment is a portion of a city, town, village, or country neighborhood. We operate within pretty well-defined boundaries. A few are denominational executives, editors, roving ecumenicals. These try to convince the rest of us that "really the world is our parish." But we know better. Whether we are in an African village along the Congo or on a street in the Chicago Loop, we know that the world for us lies within a few square miles.

It is these few square miles, this area of operation, which we want to designate the "community," however inaccurate it may sound to call an area around the Chicago Loop a community. Canon Raven, addressing a rural life conference a few years ago, said that community is "the magic word of today, soothing like the old lady's 'Mesopotamia,' spell-binding like the wizard's 'abracadabra,' opening the road to unlimited prosperity like Ali Baba's 'open-sesame' -- it is the word that calls men and sets them dreaming."

Truly it has set men dreaming. They have used the term "community" to describe everything from the Christian Church around the world to a hive of industrious and well-integrated bees. It has been appropriated to designate any group which may have even one thing in common, regardless of how "un-community-like" it may be. So we hear of the "business community," the "artistic community," the "engineering community," and even the "community of the Smiths" including in it every person living whose name happens to be Smith.

Whatever the term community may mean to others, for us community means the geographic area in which we operate in a local parish. We admit to doing what Emil Brunner says we do: we give the name "community" to its mere shadow, but at least its shadow can be seen in one spot upon the terra firma.

The emphasis upon geography is made because we believe that, even in

---

\* This paper grew out of two chapel talks which the author made recently at Yale Divinity School, where he is a member of the faculty teaching courses on the rural church. Previous to that Mr. Becker was Rural Secretary of the United Christian Missionary Society.



a jet-propelled age, propinquity retains some significance. This requires no argument in the realm of courtship. Except for a few poets, correspondence is still considered a poor substitute for the real thing. A few years ago a group of Yale sociologists found that the great majority of marriages in New Haven are between persons who live within twenty blocks of each other before marriage. Here is one significant experience in life which still is influenced by geography and primary associations.

What is obvious in the realm of romance is just as obvious in other essential areas. It is equally true that neither culture nor character can be developed by any sort of remote control. The basic qualities of our culture and of individual character, whether good or bad, arise out of the associations we have with people whom we know well and with whom we have either been willing or forced to pass the time of day.

It follows that, if we want the Christian faith to have any influence upon our culture and upon the character of our people, we must give ourselves to the building of community, to the discovery of ways in which the people within our local area or operation can have opportunity to pass the time of day with one another. Ours will be a losing and disheartening work unless we see that an essential element in it is to build community.

Community, in this sense, means that men have a chance to know one another as whole persons, to know and be known by the same persons in a variety of different contexts. Community can exist only where men have a chance to know one another at a deeper level than that of the Babbitt and the bromide.

This, of course, is one of the crucial problems of our culture. People living in the constantly changing procession which we call civilization today can brush off only the most superficial sort of influences upon each other. Freed by modern technology from the necessity of neighboring, men seek out and are sought out by persons who want only a part of their interests and so escape from ever knowing or being known as a whole person. Even the family, to withstand the pressures of our day, has become a special interest group competing with the service club, the chamber of commerce, the labor union, the breeders' association and often the church. In this sort of world it is but inevitable that religion likewise becomes another interest, a garment to be put on and off as men are attracted to it or tire of it.

The Christian faith cannot be made relevant to all the interests of life while there is no whole person and no community of persons. "Church work," Dean Willard Sperry has written, "which is an avocation will never get beyond the fringes of the cultural problems of the time. The only church work that matters is the sum of the trades and professions of church members. That is real, and it is built into a civilization as men's vocations. In all problems of applied Christianity we shall do well to concede this point and to avoid the ecclesiastical intimation that by their avocations men may redeem their vocations."

So long as we only talk at men we do not impart faith nor are we particularly valuable channels for transmitting the Word of God. Only as men become involved at some deeper level than the verbal can they really share anything of the Christian life.

There are today Christian communities in Europe and America which seek



to solve the problem of community by some sort of withdrawal from society. To the extent to which they increase the togetherness of people at work and worship, at play, in commerce and political life, they are solving the problem of community and thus of faith for themselves.

We are not yet ready to say, however, that withdrawal of any kind can be the tactics of the church. The early church testified that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God; the only Son ... he has made him known." (John 1:14 and 18 - R.S.V.) The Word is made known in flesh, in the real world. It is here, in our area of operation with its geographical boundaries, its tremendous diversities of interest, and its dynamic social organization, that we are called to build a community within which faith can work.

One mark of community, we see, is that men within it are in association with each other at a great many points. They are brought together in many common interests, and association takes place at a deeper level than the mere verbal. Community can then, as Baker Brownell has written, take on a substantive rather than an attributive nature. Whole people arise out of such association. More is required of them than an isolated interest, a fragment of their attention. We then have persons who can give themselves wholly to the Christian faith, men who can be so captured by the love of God that a consistent quality of life runs through all their diverse roles and interests.

Another and correlative quality of community is integrity, a sense of wholeness, of completeness. On the reverse side of the shield of integrity is responsibility. Community exists where men exercise a sense of responsibility for one another and for the institutions of their common life. Community arises when men say "we" instead of "they."

This sense of integrity and responsibility has been called a community of fate. When disaster strikes one, all feel involved in it. When one suffers good fortune, all share the satisfaction. The double quality of integrity and responsibility is frequently illustrated where community exists. Farmer Brown breaks his leg at corn-planting time, and unless it is planted within a few days there will be no chance for a crop. The neighbors feel a community of fate. Their sense of responsibility brings them to Farmer Brown's assistance, and they gather on an appointed day to plant his field for him.

Again, a community is alarmed at the number of farms being sold to absentee landlords. The leaders of the community meet to discuss the problem. A land tenure committee is formed and a program set in motion to assist young men to get started on the land.

In the urban community integrity and responsibility may find expression in slum clearance and a low-income housing project or in the spontaneous emergence of citizens' committees when issues threatening community stability arise.

It cannot be argued that this sense of integrity and responsibility is always expressed to the glory of God. Too often community integrity has meant restrictive covenants, resistance to authentic change, and organization to keep the "undesirables" out. Community always stands under the judgment of God and is partial and incomplete apart from his redeeming activity. It is only argued here that integrity and responsibility give to community its substance



within which the Christian faith can work for the transformation of culture and character.

Neither do we affirm that integrity means uniformity. Quite the reverse is true. Community cannot long exist apart from diversity. It must have within it gifts sufficiently diverse to assure continuity and completeness. Many contemporary social groups are too small, too rigid, too partial in their interests to be considered communities. This describes countless rural churches within which no community can exist. These churches minister only to a part of man, not the whole man in all of his relationships. Their constituency is small with little diversity in age, in talents, in religious understanding and is unrepresentative of the total community in which they are set. To assert community is to encourage the talents and interests peculiar to each person. "If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body." (I Corinthians 12:19-20 - R.S.V.) No one has better described the unity in diversity of community, nor more clearly, than the Apostle Paul. Here men's special interests, their vocations, the pulling and hauling for their time and talents are set in the context of community in which there is responsibility.

The realization of community as understood here may seem so remote as to make it irrelevant. Such a feeling must be rejected. It is the question of the devil who says to us: "Keep on preaching to the faithful. Do not be troubled that you have only partial people sitting before you. They know a good sermon when they hear it. You will have done all you can for them when you have given them a nice satisfying religious experience. It is not your fault that the people will not be with one another in any other relationship until they meet here again. Do not fret that they have no common life in which the Gospel can be made relevant. You know that if you can just make it good enough and warm their souls they will be back to hear you again." This satanic appeal finds such widespread acceptance because of our ignorance of the nature both of faith and of culture. As ministers our work is to build a context of life among men within which the Word of God can find communication.

This places severe qualifications upon the sort of professionalism which we develop in the ministry. We cannot claim ministerial immunity for ourselves and at the same time ask for the whole-souled commitment of others.

A group of rural ministers was meeting a few years ago on the campus of a state agricultural and engineering college. Also on the campus was being conducted a short course for plumbing engineers. In the dining hall the language of the plumbers became so obnoxious to the clergy that they asked if they could have their meals served in another part of the building. In this same conference these ministers agreed that they needed to make Christianity more relevant to the life of the community.

This sort of ministerial immunity which says you can have community only on our terms leaves us as poor as before -- with the plumbers going their way, the clergy theirs, and in between on the misty flats the rest move to and fro.

The professionalism which we seek must be one which gives us a competent understanding of the conditions under which faith has its opportunity. The minister must himself enter into community with all his mind, body, heart, and soul. He cannot wait until it becomes a community of saints before he does so. He must so involve himself that others will become involved in a life-surrendering encounter with God.